

Space Station: At the Brink

Congress went to the brink of doing away with the U.S. space station last week, then pulled back. In a series of complicated maneuvers, both sides of Congress postponed a final decision and gave the project enough money to survive until next year. They passed responsibility to the new president, who will seal its fate.

The House provided a total of \$902 million for the space station beginning on 1 October, less than leaders of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) had said was a bare survival diet for the project. The money was divided into three pots: \$387 million to carry the project along at a rate of about \$60 million a month until 15 April, \$65 million in shut-down costs, and \$450 million to carry it along for the rest of the year if the President should decide to keep it.

Meanwhile, the Senate Appropriations Committee, following the more severe prescription of Senator William Proxmire (D-WI), chairman of the NASA appropriations subcommittee, provided only \$200 million. This would have been a killing blow. But it was softened with an additional grant of \$600 million to be shifted away from the Defense Department. A Senate aide explains that this is to come from "unobligated prior-year funds," or money the Pentagon was given earlier but could not spend fast enough.

The formula, the aide says, represents a compromise, less insulting to the President than a solution proposed by Senator J. Bennett Johnston (D-LA). Johnston wanted to take the \$600 million specifically out of the Strategic Defense Initiative, and was thought to have enough votes to carry off the raid. Even the more graceful solution finally adopted by the committee has raised hackles at the White House. Both the President and his budget director have written to senators to warn of a potential veto.

It now looks as though Congress may agree on a figure for the space station somewhere between \$800 and \$902 million. And, because of the ongoing Defense contracting scandal, it is unlikely that many members will vocally defend the Pentagon's right to hold onto money it has not been able to spend.

One problem that still must be smoothed over is the apparent conflict posed to the European and Japanese partners in the station. They have insisted that the project not be a military one. Some creative bookkeeping will have to be done at NASA to shift the Pentagon's \$600 million into other ac-

counts, and to take back \$600 million from those accounts for the space station.

■ **National Science Foundation.** In the same bill that provides funds for the space station, the Senate and House appropriations committees rejected the request of the National Science Foundation's director, Erich Bloch, for a separate budget line for his proposed science and technology centers program. But while the committees declined to give Bloch \$150 million for the initiative, they have indicated that the agency may fund at least a few centers from money allocated for research so long as existing programs are not adversely affected.

Overall, NSF's budget is expected to grow by 9.4% in fiscal year 1989, bringing total agency funding to around \$1.88 billion compared to \$1.72 billion for 1988. The research and related activities account would climb at least 8.6% to \$1.578 billion under the House Appropriations Committee bill. Funding could be higher, depending on how a conference committee settles differences in the bill passed by the House and Senate—the latter having provided an additional \$15 million for research.

The agency's science and engineering education program is slated to receive the largest increase at NSF—12% under the Senate plan and 22.8% under the House package. The Senate funding level of \$156 million is the same as that requested by the agency.

■ **ELIOT MARSHALL**
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EPA Proposes State Action on Aldicarb

Aldicarb is a highly effective pesticide, but it is also very toxic to humans and leaches easily into ground water, a common source of drinking water. For this set of characteristics, the chemical last week won the dubious distinction of being the first pesticide to be regulated under a new plan to protect ground water proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

According to the EPA proposal, the agency would assign to states most of the responsibility for controlling ground water pollution. Some congressional legislators, however, have been pressing for a stronger federal role. Until now, ground water contamination has been regulated by a patchwork of federal and state laws.

Under EPA's proposal, states would draft regulatory plans subject to agency approval. They would identify vulnerable areas based on soil porosity, crop use, and pesticide application methods; develop plans by region or county to restrict pesticide use based on the chemical's leachability; and monitor contamination.

Aldicarb became the first candidate to be regulated under the EPA proposal in part because it has been detected in wells in 11 states at concentrations exceeding 10 parts per billion (ppb), a level that the federal government says poses an unacceptable risk in drinking water. It is one of the most acutely toxic pesticides available, according to EPA. In humans, it is known to cause gastrointestinal disorders, unconsciousness, blurred vision, seizures, and disorientation.

Aldicarb, whose brand name is Temik, has been on the American market since 1970 and is a systemic pesticide used to kill nematodes and other insects. More than 5 million

pounds are applied to the soil every year to treat mainly citrus, potatoes, peanuts, soybeans, and cotton.

In 1979, on Long Island, drinking water near sandy fields of potatoes treated with aldicarb contained concentrations up to 515 ppb. Residents now use activated charcoal filters to purify the water. Three years ago, aldicarb-tainted watermelon from California was responsible for more than 1000 cases of food poisoning.

John Moore, EPA assistant administrator for pesticides and toxic substances, said at a press conference on 22 June, "Our primary concern is preventing acute toxicity". EPA would cancel aldicarb use in a state that proposes a plan it deems inadequate.

Moore said that states would have to develop a regulatory scheme that alerts them to the onset of contamination as well as when concentrations exceed federal standards. "We're trying to prevent pollution," Moore said, but he also acknowledged that the proposal would allow some contamination. Under the agency plan, states also can decide to allow pollution in a certain area if it is not expected to be a potential source of drinking water. On this point, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group called EPA's proposal "shortsighted."

Steven Schmotzer, director of environmental affairs at Rhone-Poulenc Ag Company, the only manufacturer of aldicarb, says that EPA's plan "is consistent with the company policy for the past several years."

The agency's proposal on regulating the pesticide, which has been under special review within EPA since 1984, is open to public comment for 60 days.

■ **MARJORIE SUN**